

Wittenberg Department of English Colloquium

Fiction and Memory: The Problem of the Launch Controller

Let me begin with a first-person, past tense story: When I was just short of 13, my parents moved from Canada to the United States for the second time. We settled in Miami, Florida, and I attended a school much rougher than any I had seen in Canada. It wasn't long after the Cuban revolution and the Cuban kids I met were still showing the trauma of that experience and of exile while the Anglo kids were trying hard to be—in an old-fashioned way—tough. The violence and the drugs—even though it was just kids ruining their livers by inhaling airplane glue from paper bags—and the sexuality—even though some of the girls in junior high were still wearing girdles—all scared the heck out of me. Particularly since my Anglo classmates found my accent to be unacceptably strange and they thought the diminutive form of my name—Terry—was only a girl's name. So I tried to escape their world by applying to attend a technical/vocational high school that had a reputation as a quieter place. But that required me, first, to have a technical or vocational interest, which I didn't. So I conjured for myself an interest in the printing trade, because I was intensely interested in words and pictures, which, then, required the medium of paper for effective display. I was also interested in paper itself, and wanted to make it from scratch. However, when I told my father I wanted to become a printer, he looked shocked and told me that “only shanty Irish become printers.”

Some of you may not be aware of the intensity of prejudice that used to exist against Irish people. Here's a vulgar story cloaked in a joke (or is it a joke cloaked in a vulgar story?): “What's the difference between lace curtain Irish [i.e. higher class] and shanty Irish?” Answer: “Lace curtain Irish remove their dishes from the sink *before* they

urinate." So that gives you a pretty good idea of the intensity of a prejudice that has gone out of style, but that resonated deeply with my father's generation.

My father's response to my educational decision surprised me because the major part of my heritage—despite my name—is French. Nonetheless, I did what my father said ~~that is, to study electronics~~ because that's what one did all those years ago, and I studied electronics for three years, emerging at 16 years of age with a trade certificate and an invitation from Cape Kennedy, which was then called Cape Canaveral, to train to become a launch controller. Instead, I left home ^{a few weeks before my 17th birthday} ~~when I was 16~~ and started putting words and images on paper.

I've just given you a literary form: a first-person narrative. It is, by and large, factually correct. One exception is that my interest in paper-making didn't come about until I was 19 or so.

I just used a uselessly all-encompassing word when I called my story a "narrative." In order to talk about this form usefully, we need a more specific vocabulary than that: Is it then a report, a story, a short story, a summary, a memoir, a history? What is it? These distinctions—or even the need for distinctions—may seem arbitrary, but, for a writer, they provide a guide about how to produce a work that's both *complete* and *understood*.

I'll lay down some groundwork before attempting to spin all this out for you. First, every first-person narrative requires a negotiation with the truth. The French critic Roland Barthes rewrote an old, literary-sounding description of homosexuality—"the love that dare not speak its name"—to describe autobiography, which he called "the novel that dare not speak its name."

The reason for what I called the unavoidable negotiation with the truth in narrative is simple and involves ^{or} the first principles of all literary art: selection and re-creation. ~~Or, you can only show so much on a page.~~

LITERATURE THE ONLY ART FORM THAT DOESN'T DIRECTLY USE ANY OF THE SENSES, AND CAN'T...

An ineluctable result of the creation of a narrative is the creation of a narrator and, sometimes, the creation of an author. ^{and a self} Let me illustrate:

NEGA MEZLEKIA AND ANNE STONE AND "FROM THE BELLY OF THE HYENA"

Which brings me to the heart of this argument, which is that ^{our sense of} genre determines ^{the way we receive meaning from any text.} ~~meaning.~~

I'm not using "genre" in that popular sense of "genre fiction," implying as it does the strict formulas of sword and sorcery, second-chance romance, hard-boiled, or porn. These are commercial categories visited on us by the entertainment industry and, unfortunately, learned by many young would-be writers as the forms they should replicate to be considered "writers." One sort of evidence for this is the applications to the writing program I teach in. Increasingly, literary forms are seen as checklists—the characteristics of a wizard, the exhausted language of porn, the tediously shocking ending—that one writes to in order to produce a recognizable commodity.

I'm speaking instead about the sometimes fine distinctions of form that, from a writer's point of view, ^{are generic} distinguish genres. Genre doesn't tell a writer *what* to write but *how* to write.

Let me start making these categories more useful. A memoir presumes a relationship to truth if not always to fact. If fact were the only issue, the narrative would

dilute its impact by spending far too much time in exposition. By the same token, the memoir must sometimes be mindful of what's plausible, and details may be *removed* to make it more so: Here are some examples that we might call anecdotal memoirs:

CLOSER TO HOME: DESCRIBE BOOK

- 1) BOLSTER
- 2) LAYTON
- 3) DUDEK

If, then, the memoirist is not a mere conduit for information, but has to shape information to make his narrative coherent and unified, he is put at an interesting kind of risk. That is, any time you write the word "I" you are no longer talking about yourself but about a creation whose existence is a function of *selection* and *voice*.

THE HISTORY OF LITERATURE AND OF NARRATION, PRESENCE AND ABSENCE, THE WAY WE BUILD A MODEL OF A SPEAKER BASED ON HIS OR HER SELECTION AND OUR RECEPTION OF A VOICE THAT IMPLIES A KNOWN OR KNOWABLE SPEAKER

Again, any time you write the word "I" you are no longer talking about yourself but about a literary creation. That creation may, in fact, be quite unlike the way you or others perceive what some call your "persistent" self.

If we call a first-person past tense narration a "memoir," then, we look for earmarks of genre to help us understand it. These include: a realistic and recognizable world that is consciously created in order to speak to an audience (compare for example, the diary entry, which takes the world for granted and which reveals almost nothing to the outsider); a narrator who is attempting to draw us into this created world to reveal something—him or herself, a bygone era, a contested chain of events—but who will inevitably reveal something of self; and a relationship to the truth. If, let's say, Terence Byrnes writes an autobiography called "My Life as a Launch Controller at Cape

Of course, it's natural that we should expect to see the way top shown of a ~~that~~ speaker peeking out from behind a curtain of text.

Canaveral," and reveals through the tone of his narrative voice a bitterness toward his bosses because he thinks they are prejudiced against people with Irish names, and who suggests that he was hindered in making changes that would have prevented the Challenger disaster, and who—just for good measure, attributes his bosses' inadequacy to the fact that they were women—what do we think of his memoir? We suspect that it is corrupt, that Byrnes has axes to grind, that Byrnes is the kind of person who locates all fault in the world rather than in himself. This memoir has lost all authority and becomes bad literature.

On the other hand, if "My Life as a Launch Controller at Cape Canaveral" is given a jazzier title, let's say, "Launch Control," and is a first-person past tense fictional story, the difference between the fiction and non-fiction lies not in content but in our generic expectations. In the fiction, we expect to see the resentful, misogynistic, self-aggrandizing Byrnes character be tested and revealed by the *story*. He has to be confronted with what he doesn't understand about himself and made to understand, to flee from understanding, to be a shifted a little, or to be destroyed. In this case, it's the story and the author who develop the authority of the narrative, not the narrator himself.

It may be difficult to immediately wrap your heads around the last point, so I'll give one example that may demonstrate it:

In Ford Madox Ford's novel *The Good Soldier*, the narrator describes a girl in a white organdy dress in the moonlight, saying breathlessly that she "glowed like a phosphorescent fish in a cupboard." Put that expression into the mouth of any non-fictional narrator: the reporter talking about a scene in Bagdad? The rector of Wittenberg University describing a female graduate at this spring's convocation? The author of a

memoir of a life spent in the fashion trade? Suddenly, the speaker sounds, perhaps, mad; not like a memoirist, but like a character.

Selection of material, the artificiality of a beginning and an ending, the need to write for an audience by overcoming the pure abstraction of print, the use of summary, fully dramatized scene, half-scene, the creation of something called a narrator, and the very need to point at oneself and *speak* are all part of first-person past-tense fiction and of memoir. The difference is generic: the memoirist is held to account for his inadequacies by the reader and the memoir lives or dies by the authority of the memoirist's narrator; the first-person fictional narrator is held to account by a story which reveals and tests those very inadequacies. Which is to say that most first person past tense fictions are not about event or fact or the believability of the speaker. They're about an imperfect speaker whom we see imperfectly contending with his or her world and who suffers or enjoys the consequences of that contention.

Which brings me back to the "problem" part of this talk's title, "The Problem of the Launch Controller." In truth, I have no recollection if the invitation to work launching space ships and satellites from Cape Canaveral included an offer to train as a launch controller, which is a highly elevated and monumentally responsible position. That part of my story was a probable lie. So if I'm writing a memoir, from the title on, it has no place to stand, no relation to truth. On the other hand, if we shift the generic name of this story a few steps over and call it a fiction, the reader will greedily search the narrator's—not my!—background and wonder if his sense of inadequacy has driven him to self-aggrandize because of his anxiety about being shanty Irish, and will wonder if his family's failure to prosper in the United States makes him compensate by giving himself

a position that reflects American status in the world, and will wonder if he is trying to appease his class-conscious father. Most important, though, that reader will note how the narrator betrays himself through the way he speaks, what he notices and doesn't notice, and how the *story* will test him and hold him to account. If none of these things happens, however, the reader is left without the generic clues that enable the very *creation* of meaning.

of fiction